

# The Projection of Chinese National Image by Chinese Overseas Exhibitions of Ancient Art

Xi Chen

School of Foreign Languages  
School of Cultural Heritage  
Northwest University  
Xi'an, China 710127

Haiyun Wu

Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Promotion Center  
Shaanxi History Museum  
Xi'an, China 710061

**Abstract**—Since the beginning of the 21st century, the concept and important influence of the national image have been widely accepted by the international community. The overseas exhibition of Chinese art is an important platform for presenting China's national image and has many dimensions. It is not only the visual message that the artworks as exhibits convey to the visitors, but also the content of Chinese culture in the exhibition, publicity and publication, public education, etc., which constitute a multi-dimensional presentation system together with the exhibits. The audience can actively perceive the image of China through various links of the exhibition. It is necessary to translate the foreign language exhibition atlas, media manual, museum homepage, and scholarly articles from the perspective of cross-cultural research, and to outline the multi-dimensional presentation of the national image in the foreign exchange of Chinese cultural relics, providing some enlightenment for the shaping of the national image of China in the new era.

**Keywords**—ancient art; overseas exhibition of art; national image; museum

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the concept and important influence of the national image have attracted increasing attention from the international community. The concept of "image" appeared earlier in "Book of History" and "the Rites of Zhou", meaning the appearance of human beings and the image of objects. Today, the image has been understood as the overall evaluation of the outward manifestation of people or things determined by their intrinsic characteristics under certain conditions [1]. In the book "National Image Theory", Guan Wenhui defines the "national image" as follows: "The national image is a complex. It is the overall evaluation and identification of the country itself, the state's behavior, the state's activities by external public and the internal public. The national image has great influence and cohesiveness and is the embodiment of the overall strength of a country." A good national image can be regarded as a "national business card" in foreign exchanges. Comrade Xi Jinping pointed out that the precious cultural heritage has become a "golden business card" of China. The best and most direct way to transform China's "cultural heritage" into "golden business cards" is the overseas exhibition of ancient art, that is, foreign exchange

of cultural relics. In fact, since the day when Chinese ancient art has gone abroad, it has always been accompanied by the presentation of the national image. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, the "International Exhibition of Chinese Art" held in London in 1935 was the first time that ancient Chinese art went out of the country for exchange exhibition. The National Government hoped to showcase Chinese art and culture through the opportunity of the London Art Exhibition and to shape China's image in the UK [2]. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the guidance of the "cultural heritage diplomacy", China held several large-scale international cultural relics exhibitions in the 1950s and early 1970s, and the foreign exchange of cultural relics of China began. After the reform and opening up, foreign exchange of cultural relics served the diplomacy. Many exhibitions were held in conjunction with important activities such as the visit of the head of state, the Chinese Culture Year and cultural projects. In recent years, the state has paid close attention to the foreign exchanges of cultural relics abroad, and the important role of cultural relics as a national "golden business card" has been affirmed. In today's fierce international competition, shaping a good national image has become the core of many countries' foreign relations, and it has very important practical significance for China.

## II. THE STATUS QUO OF RESEARCH

The display of the national image originated from the concept of "Rue de Nations" at the 1878 Paris World Expo. The participating countries arranged the passage to the national booth to highlight their national characteristics and stand out [3]. Like the World Expo, foreign exchange of cultural relics provides an opportunity to export their culture directly to a large number of international visitors, that is, to show the image of the country. However, the current concern and research on the foreign exchange of cultural relics in China has not yet covered the field of national image. In contrast, international scholars have noticed the impact of foreign exchange of cultural relics on China's national image. Sally Peck took the exhibition of cultural relics of Han Dynasty in Cambridge, England, and the exhibition of terracotta warriors and horses in New York, USA as the main cases, and pointed out that "In the past few decades, China has used cultural and educational exchanges as the

core means of reshaping the image, and also has soften the overseas image by exporting its history." [4] In fact, with the rise of China's economy, the study of China's national image has aroused widespread interest in the international academic community. Some scholars have proposed that more effective way of shaping the country's image is not only necessary for China, but also imperative. Not only because the world's attention is increasingly focused on China, but also because the Chinese public is more concerned than ever before about how their national image is viewed by other countries, it is related to their collective identity [5]. Case studies on China's national image have involved communication, diplomacy, commerce, major international events and other fields. Some scholars pointed out that future research should also include "the study of cultural resources in China's public diplomacy, such as Chinese Peking Opera, Confucius, Giant Panda, etc." [6] Foreign exchanges of cultural relics are important component of China's public diplomacy, and cultural relics are valuable cultural resources. Therefore, the presentation of the national image in foreign exchanges of cultural relics needs urgent attention and research.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Charles Horton Cooley, a famous sociologist and social psychologist in the United States, put forward the theory of "I'm in the mirror", and pointed out that human behavior depended on the understanding of self. And this understanding of self is formed mainly through social interaction with others. Others' evaluation of their own attitudes, attitudes, etc. is a "mirror" that reflects the self. Individuals know and grasp themselves through this "mirror". Different from the exhibitions in domestic museums mainly aiming at domestic audiences, Chinese cultural relics have been examined by international perspectives in overseas exhibitions. Therefore, the research on the foreign exchange of cultural relics in China is on the effect and image research, and mainly adopts a cross-cultural research perspective. Based on this, by translating the foreign language exhibition atlas, media manual, museum homepage, and scholarly articles from the perspective of cross-cultural research, this paper hopes to outline the multi-dimensional presentation of the national image in the foreign exchange of Chinese cultural relics, and provide some enlightenment for the shaping of the national image of China in the new era.

### III. THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PRESENTATION OF CHINESE IMAGE IN THE OVERSEAS EXHIBITION OF ANCIENT CHINESE ART

The presentation of the Chinese image with the overseas exhibition of ancient art as a platform has many dimensions. It is not only the visual information conveyed to the visitors as the exhibits of cultural relics, but also the ancient art level and craftsmanship of ancient China exhibited by precious cultural relics such as the horse-flying swallow, the phoenix ring-shaped copper-fired stove, and the three-colored lemur camel. The exhibitions, public education, publicity and publications in the foreign exchanges of cultural relics all involve the image of China, and constitute a multi-dimensional presentation system together with the exhibits. The audience can actively perceive the image, spirit and

value of China through various links during the whole process of visiting the exhibition.

#### A. Chinese Business Card: Ancient Artwork as an Exhibit

From 1973 to 1978, under the personal instructions of Premier Zhou Enlai, the "Unearthed Cultural Relics Exhibition of the People's Republic of China" was exhibited in 15 countries (regions) including France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It was the first large-scale cultural relic exhibition in New China. The older generation of archaeologists Xia Nai and others selected precious cultural relics from all over the country, including jade clothes sewn with gold wire, to represent the long history and culture of the Chinese nation. The time spanned from the Paleolithic Lantian to the Ming Dynasty [7]. According to the website of the National Art Museum of the United States, 385 pieces of precious cultural relics were exhibited in this exhibition. It was the largest exhibition held by the museum at that time, and received 684,238 spectators during the three-and-a-half-month exhibition period [8]. The American Exhibition selected the Bronze Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow of East Han Dynasty as the cover of the exhibition album, which showed China's energetic spirit. Since then, comprehensive exhibitions including the "Great China Bronze Age Exhibition" and "Chinese Civilization History — China Treasures Exhibition" have revealed the image of China's eastern civilization with its profound historical and cultural roots (See "Fig. 1"). Especially for the countries that exhibit Chinese cultural relics for the first time, the comprehensive exhibition can outline a basic picture of Chinese civilization for the audience.

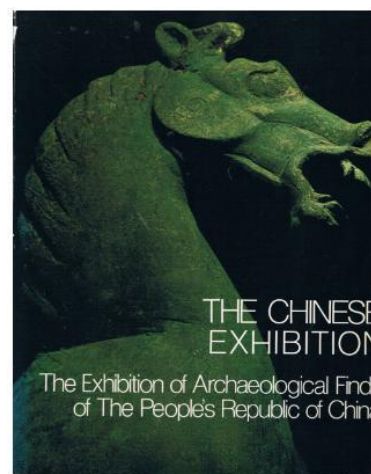


Fig. 1. Cover of the American Exhibition Atlas of the Unearthed Cultural Relics Exhibition of the People's Republic of China, 1974-1975 [9].

With the continuous improvement of China's national strength, the countries and regions exhibiting ancient Chinese art overseas have been expanding, and new archaeological discoveries have emerged. International audiences are increasingly eager to have a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. The thematic exhibitions for cultural relics in a certain historical period or cultural relics of a certain type have gradually become mainstream, showing a multi-cultural civilization and elegant manner of

great country with absorbing anything and everything, such as "Special Exhibition of Culture of Western Zhou Dynasty", "Terracotta Warriors Exhibition of Qin Dynasty", "Tibet Art Exhibition, "Tang Dynasty" and so on. Terracotta Warriors of Qin Dynasty are undoubtedly the "national business card" of ancient Chinese art. Since it was first exhibited in Australia in 1982, it has been exhibited in Japan, Sweden, Norway, the United States and other countries and regions. From 2007 to 2008, the number of visitors exceeded 850,000 at the British Museum, setting off a global enthusiasm for Terracotta Warriors. The different forms of scorpions, horses, bronze waterfowls, armor, etc. included in the exhibits of the Terracotta Warriors show the highly developed cultural and artistic level of the Qin Dynasty, and the funeral customs. The exhibits Hercules has been deeply loved by Western audiences for its clear muscle lines and has become a star exhibit. It is also considered to be a witness for Chinese and Western cultural exchanges by archaeologists. These cultural relics are symbols of Chinese civilization in the Qin Dynasty, including the embodiment of history, art, science and culture. In addition to the theme exhibitions, Terracotta Warriors are also the main highlights of many other comprehensive exhibitions. The report of the exhibition of "Chinese dynasties" in 2005, which toured Kagoshima, Japan and other places, and the questionnaire survey of visitors to the exhibition of "Qin and Han civilization" in the New York metropolitan in 2017 and the exhibition of "First Emperor of Qin and Terracotta Warriors" in Liverpool, England, all mentioned that the terracotta warriors were the most attractive exhibits in the exhibition. In addition, the civilization of Tang Dynasty, the Silk Road, the Qing court, etc. are also very popular exhibition themes.

In general, overseas exhibitions of ancient Chinese art have presented different national images in different historical periods. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic, the exhibitions mainly focus on showing the long history of China. With the development of the times, the country's image of diversity, openness, self-confidence and tolerance has gradually emerged in the exhibition of cultural relics. The selection of exhibits also shows the changes from being the most precious to the most diversified. In order to protect the cultural relics, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage released two lists of cultural relics forbidden to go abroad in 2002 and 2012 respectively. The star exhibits in early stage of exhibition such as Bronze Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow no longer went abroad. In recent years, many exhibitions have not been limited to the grades when selecting the exhibits, but valued the issues and cultural connotations obtained in the cultural relics. For example, in 2010-2011, in the "Classical Furniture and Interior Decoration Design Exhibition of Qianlong Garden" exhibited at three museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of the United States, the aesthetics of Emperor Qianlong was shown through the paintings, calligraphy, porcelain, architectural construction, and even the rocks in the garden, which was highly praised by the audience and many media [11].

## B. Displaying the Chinese Elements in the Exhibition

In the overseas exhibition of ancient Chinese art, in order to match the theme of the exhibition, the museum will use some Chinese elements in the exhibition, such as Chinese characters, Chinese painting, Chinese ornamentation, Chinese dragon, imperial yellow and so on. The use of these Chinese elements has played a very good role in the display of Chinese history and culture and the image of China, and even played a prominent role.

Using calligraphy of Qin Dynasty and red and black color is most common in the exhibition of terracotta warriors. As one of the unified policies of "the same text, the same track", a style of calligraphy of Qin Dynasty has been popular until the end of the Western Han Dynasty. Although it has been replaced by an ancient style of calligraphy current in the Han Dynasty, the official seal has been used. Because of its mellow and smooth, it has been favored by calligraphers of all ages. It is an important milestone in the history of the development of Chinese characters (See "Fig. 2"). Chinese characters are the epitome of Chinese culture and the crystallization of the wisdom of the Chinese nation. The mellow and full calligraphy of Qin Dynasty symmetrically reflects the balance of Chinese culture.



Fig. 2. "First Emperor of Qin — Qin seal script banner of Shaanxi Terracotta Warriors" exhibition in Denmark in 2015 [12].

In 2016-2017, during the exhibition "The only Chinese character, the only beauty — the history and aesthetics of Chinese characters", the Chinese characters were the protagonist. Through the oracle bones, bronzes, inscriptions and other artifacts, the development history and unique artistic beauty of Chinese characters were shown.

In addition to the use of Chinese elements, the display of scene restoration is often used in the exhibition of Chinese cultural relics abroad. For example, viewing the palace interior, the throne, etc. in the exhibition of the palace art of the Qing Dynasty, the audience seems to be in the palace of the Qing Dynasty, creating an immersive feeling. In 2014, in the "Red Makeup of Ten Miles — Exhibition of Marriage Customs of China's East Zhejiang" exhibited by the Chinese Museum of the Nagasaki Confucius Temple in Japan, the exquisite wooden carvings of "wangong sedan" and "qiangong bed" in the republic of China create a scene of "wedding ceremony" and "wedding room".



In recent years, digital display methods have been applied in exhibitions. The application of multimedia and video has replaced simple exhibition boards, and the historical and cultural background of the exhibits has been more vividly presented to the audience, which has deepened the audience's understanding of the exhibition. For example, from 2017 to 2018, Hong Kong's "Millions of Miles — Silk Road, the World Heritage" opened a space-time picture of the Silk Road with the video "Changan Tianshan Corridor Road Network". In the exhibition, more than ten themes such as "the Western Region – Zhang Qian", "Silk Road Traffic", "Silk Road Religious Site" and "Silk Road Music" were digitally displayed, which complemented the static exhibits and achieved good results. For the first time, Qatar's "China Gem Show" used VR technology and the App Digital Navigation System. The audience can watch the panoramic video of the Terracotta Warriors wearing VR glasses. Through experiencing the panoramic virtual reality scene in video, the excavation and introduction of terracotta warriors are fully understood. The digital navigation system can transmit the exhibit information, cultural history and other details to the audience through Bluetooth or QR code, which is welcomed and praised by the audience.

### C. Promoting the Chinese Spirit in Publishing

Although the exhibits are the protagonists of foreign exchanges of cultural relics, the information conveyed during the visit is relatively limited due to the limitations of the exhibition venue and the length of the commentary. Therefore, in order to match with the exhibition, major museums will publish an exhibition catalogue containing more exhibit information and related academic research to satisfy the audience's need to further understand Chinese culture. First of all, the cover of the exhibition catalogue will generally use the representative cultural relics in the exhibition, which is the embodiment of the most intuitive Chinese image. For example, in the exhibition on the theme of Tang Dynasty, the gold-plated copper dragon was used as the cover, and the Bronze Galloping Horse Treading on a Flying Swallow appeared on the cover of the album many times, reflecting the Chinese spirit of struggling. In addition, the preface of the catalogue reflects the significance of the exhibition, the recognition of Chinese culture and the importance of cultural exchanges with China. Michael Brand, curator of the Art Museum of New South Wales, mentioned in the foreword of the exhibition "The Heritage of Great Tang Dynasty from the Silk Road Capital" that "the Tang Dynasty was the golden age in Chinese history. The Tang Empire was the richest and most powerful in the world at that time. Chang'an, the capital of this great empire and the multi-cultural civilization demonstrated by the international metropolis is also the place that Sydney admires and prides itself on the other side of the ocean. [13] Neil MacGregor, curator of the British Museum, wrote in the foreword of The First Emperor-China's Terracotta Army, "By focusing on the rich archaeological discoveries of China's first emperor, the British museum is pleased to bring to light the achievements of China's early imperial era and to foster a wider public interest in the great civilization of the world." [14] Finally, the article in the atlas is a deeper interpretation of Chinese

culture, which is not only limited to exhibit information, but also has more and more academic value. This paper takes the exhibition "Going towards the Tang Dynasty", which was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2004, as an example. In addition to the exhibition and exhibit information, the following articles are also included: "Art and History of China from the 3rd to 8th Centuries", "China seeing Central Asian Metal Products", "Glass Art along the Silk Road", "Textile Evolution along the Silk Road", "Image of the Northern Buddha in the 4th and 6th Centuries", and "The Art of Buddhist Statues in China" [15]. These articles, in conjunction with the exhibits, further demonstrate the diversity, openness and tolerance of Chinese culture.

In addition to the exhibition catalogue, the media manuals published by the Western National Museum before the official opening of the exhibition are also an important platform for displaying the image of China. The audience and the media can be informed in advance about the exhibition and exhibit information and related cultural background. For example, in 2015, "The Golden Age of China: Qianlong Emperor (1736-1795)" was held in the National Museum of Victoria in Australia in 2015 (See "Fig. 3"). In the media handbook, it highly praised China's economic, cultural and artistic achievements during the Qianlong period. And it made a detailed introduction to the Forbidden City, the Manchu rulers, the Emperor, the art of Qing Dynasty, the religious art and the art collection of the Emperor Qianlong. It was particularly worth mentioning that the media handbook also announced public lectures and educational activities in conjunction with the exhibition, covering the establishment of the Qing Dynasty, the three halls of the Forbidden City, calligraphy art, and court rituals and so on.

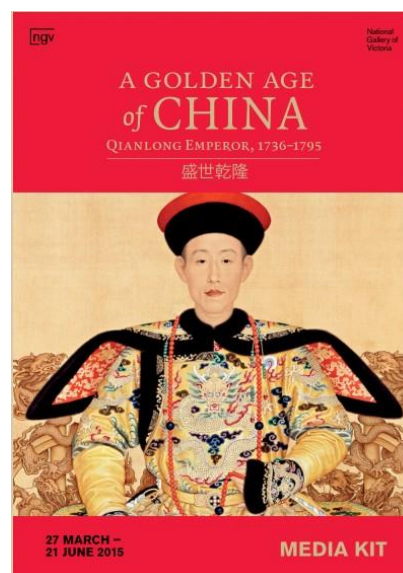


Fig. 3. Media Handbook Cover of "Golden Age of China: Qianlong Emperor" in Australia in 2015 [16].

The exhibition of Chinese ancient art has repeatedly updated the number of visitors to the exhibition museum, which has set off a Chinese craze. Apart from the charm of

Chinese culture, it has a lot to do with the promotion of the museum. Generally speaking, half a year before the opening of the exhibition or even earlier, the local mainstream media will report to attract more visitors. The audience can get to know the background of the exhibition and the exhibit information before entering the museum, which will help to get a better experience. For example, from 2008 to 2009, the number of visitors to the "Three Kingdoms Exhibition" in Tokyo, Hokkaido, and Kobe in Japan reached 1.01 million, which was the highest number of visitors to the China Cultural Relics Exhibition. In addition to the unique curatorial perspective and innovative means of exhibition, the promotion of the Asahi Shimbun as one of the organizers is also one of the important reasons for the great success of the exhibition.

#### *D. China's Value in Public Education*

In addition to the cultural relics and the Chinese culture and elements in the exhibition, and the introduction and interpretation of Chinese history and culture in the propaganda report, the different levels of public education activities carried out by the museum in conjunction with the exhibition are also one of the important dimensions of the Chinese image. Activities and academic lectures show the connotation and Chinese value of Chinese history and culture from multiple angles.

Since the content of Chinese history and culture in the Anglo-American primary and secondary education system is very limited, the school visits of the China Cultural Relics Exhibition have become an important channel for primary and secondary school students and even college students to understand Chinese culture. Taking "First Emperor of Qin Dynasty and Terracotta Warriors" in Liverpool in 2018 as an example, on the website of the Liverpool World Museum, there were clear reminders about the school arrangements, scheduled time, fares and precautions, as well as a teacher's manual and ingenious educational activities for teachers to download. In addition to the basic contents of the geographical location and climate of Shaanxi, the life of First Emperor of Qin Dynasty, and the production process of Terracotta Warriors, the teacher's handbook also cited the description of the Mausoleum of First Emperor of Qin Dynasty in Sima Qian's "Historical Records" and introduced ancient Chinese philosophy, calligraphy, yin and yang. It pointed out that the legacy left by the Qin Empire for future generations included a unified currency system and weights and measures, unified texts, and the construction of the Qin Great Wall and Qin Zhidao. In addition to encouraging students to understand and think about the structure of the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, archaeological excavations, funerary objects, etc., it also included an introduction to the history and development of the Chinese community in Liverpool [17]. León Rocca, a lecturer of Chinese studies of the Department of History in the University of Liverpool, said in an interview at the beginning of the exhibition: "In the history education of British schools, the proportion of Chinese history is too small. From this perspective, the exhibition of the Terracotta Warriors is of great significance. If the exhibition can attract more students

to care about the history of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Qin and Han Dynasties in China, or to stimulate more students to learn Chinese and visit China, the World Museum has done a great job." [18]

Finally, with the academic lectures of the exhibition, scholars, researchers and senior Chinese cultural enthusiasts have provided opportunities to better appreciate the exhibits, especially to better understand Chinese culture. An academic lecture on the wisdom of Chinese philosophy and the study of the Great Wall organized by the national museum of Liverpool were organized during the Terracotta Warriors exhibition.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Ancient art is a materialized culture. Visiting an art exhibition can provide an opportunity for the audience to actively perceive rather than passively telling. The sense of presence generated by the audience, especially the attraction and admiration of Chinese cultural charm, is another type of cultural communication, such as TV, newspapers and so on. In addition to the Chinese symbols on the material level displayed in the exhibits and exhibitions, the propaganda and publication and public education in foreign exchanges of cultural relics provide cultural communication at the behavioral level and the spiritual level, which together constitute a multi-dimensional Chinese image presentation system.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Duan Peng. Communication Strategy in the Construction of National Image [M]. Beijing: Communication University of China Press, 2007:23. (in Chinese)
- [2] Ta Kung Pao, 3rd edition, January 24, 1935. (in Chinese)
- [3] Anna Jackson, Expo: International Exhibitions 1851-2010 [M] London: V&A, 2008: 72.
- [4] Sally Peck. "China exports its history to soften its image abroad"[N]. The World Today, Vol.68, No.4 (June&July 2012).
- [5] Jian Wang(ed.). Shaping China's Global Imagination: Public Diplomacy through Communication [M]. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013: 1-26.
- [6] Jian Wang (ed.). Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication [M]. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2011: X.
- [7] China Cultural Relics Exchange Center: Glorious Mission — China Cultural Relics Exchange Center for 40 Years [M]. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2011: 22. (in Chinese)
- [8] National Gallery of Art: The Exhibition of Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China [EB/OL].[2018-11-15] [https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/1974/china\\_archaeology.html](https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/1974/china_archaeology.html)
- [9] National Gallery of Art: The Exhibition of Archaeological Finds of the People's Republic of China [M]. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1975.
- [10] "Limingguan" in Kagoshima City: "Chinese historical dynasty exhibition, more than 20,000 people" [N]. "Newspapers & Magazines in Kagoshima, August 20, 2005. (in Chinese)
- [11] Milwaukee Art Museum: Summer of China [EB/OL].[2018-6-14] <http://www.man.org.china>
- [12] Moesgaard Museum: kinas-terrakottakrigere 2015 [EB/OL].[2018-4-14] <http://www.moesgaardmuseum.dk/udstillingen/tidligere-udstillinger/kinas-terrakottakrigere/>

- [13] Art Gallery of New South Wales: Tang: treasures from the Silk Road capital [M]. New South Wales: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2016:8.
- [14] Jane Portal: The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army [M]. London: the British Museum Press, 2007:10.
- [15] James C.Y. Watt, An Jiaoyao, etc.: China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750AD [M]. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004
- [16] National Gallery of Victoria: A Golden Age of China: Qian Long Emerpor (1736-1795) [EB/OL]. [2018-8-8][https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/QIANLONG-EMPEROR\\_MEDIA-KIT.pdf](https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/QIANLONG-EMPEROR_MEDIA-KIT.pdf)
- [17] National Museum of Liverpool: China's First Emperor and terracotta warriors [EB/OL]. [2018-6-14] <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/exhibitions/terracotta-warriors/index.aspx>
- [18] Lin Weiguang. A model of "harmony and symbiosis" between Chinese and English [N]. Guangming Daily, 2018-2-10. (in Chinese)